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Patchwork of Dreams

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“Can I book a space for our students on the Dream Rocket?” It was the summer of 2009. Our students had collaborated on Jennifer Marsh’s previous public art installation the *Interdependence Tree*. At that moment, I had no sense of the challenges Marsh would need to overcome to complete the work.

The project, which aims to wrap the Saturn V Space Rocket, is now in its fifth year of production and is due for completion in the spring of 2015. The American artist Marsh has produced two public artworks since 2007, site-specific sculpture: large scale everyday objects, wrapped in colourful patchwork quilts. The work is conceived and constructed by Marsh and thousands of collaborators, who connect with her via her Internet presence and the many outreach workshops she and others run. This intriguing example of community activism and participation on a global scale, will be explored within this chapter, focusing specifically on the *Dream Rocket* project, which takes community art intervention to the boundaries of current practice.

Early Interventions

In order to read the later works, it is helpful to understand a little of why Marsh developed this approach to making sculpture. She talks of an early tendency within her practice towards exploring forms through the use of repetition, in *Beads Silhouette* 2002 she describes:

“The attention that I had paid to creating a uniform work of art curiously based on a set of unintended and unknown rules, a work that brings the viewer beyond seeing repetition in order to focus on the whole.”ⁱ

In *Blue Chair* 2005, wooden dowels were inserted into the chair’s structure; this was she explains not a conscious act. The tension between the physical object and the covering device began a line of enquiry, which continues to develop today; to make a sculpture: “That speaks about the object, but does not showcase it.”

Marsh conducted her first performative work *Victoria, Expected & Rejected* in 2007. In this installation she wrapped a sheep using wool from another flock, the wrap acted as an unexpected form of disguise. The flock rejected the animal, presumably not recognising her scent, once the wrap was removed the flock once again accepted the sheep. The unforeseen outcomes of this interaction resulted in Marsh reconsidering her practice: this interplay had opened up new possibilities for her work.

“What I gained from this performance piece is a new tool to my artistic practice, and that was unpredictability can lead to discovery, invention, losing total control can have extraordinary outcomes.”

A desire to continue this line of enquiry, led Marsh on a search for a place to situate and develop new work. Driving around, looking for a disused barn, she stumbled across an abandoned gas station in Syracuse, Central New York. In *Gas Station* we observe Marsh’s practice evolving, “I began to develop my relationship towards repetition, experience, unpredictability, wrapping of recognisable objects and desire to cross social circles.” The *Gas Station* was the first large scale public artwork Marsh had tackled, she explained that the scale and setting of the building necessitated a new approach to making sculpture. “As a practical need, the task of wrapping a 5,000 square foot building would have been impossible to do myself, I needed collaborators.” She therefore set about creating a network of makers and crafters, thousands of individuals of all ages from 15 countries and 29 states of America. The aim was to produce 3,000 fibre panels uniform in size, each 3 foot by 3 foot. “The participants were asked to create fabric squares that explored their concern about the world’s dependency on oil.” Artists, hobbyists, students and children from across the globe produced squares, bringing their cultural identities and aesthetic sensibilities to bear on their contributions. The pieces were then patched together to form a whole, echoing the repeated units in the earlier work.

When complete the Gas Station appeared to be clothed in a multi coloured, multifaceted quilt. In reading the work, it spoke of many things: the non-confrontational style of the covering, the quilt in stark contrast to the masculinity of the form. As an aesthetic device, the quilt made the station appear homespun, resonant of the 60’s and 70’s peace banners constructed by feminist activists. Although possibly unintentional, this association with activism attributes the object with a specific context, reinforcing the political and social impact of oil on the world’s communities. The Gas Station was a temporary work exhibited for three months; its legacy sits within the International Fiber Collaborative ⁱⁱ

web site as photographs, construction videos and the dialogue from the emergent virtual network of collaborators and followers.

Marsh describes the developing visual language, Internet community and production strategies, as her 'tool chest' they have evolved as the scale and complexity of the installations grow. During *Gas Station* she talks of being totally immersed in its inception and construction, due partly to the short time frame for the project and working intuitively, having not tackled a work of this nature previously. The choice of *Interdependence Tree* as a follow up to *Gas Station* could be viewed as a scaling down of purpose, choosing to wrap a custom made metal armature in order to mimic a tree. Marsh had however recognised a need to grow and consolidate the network of makers in order to fulfil the increasing ambition of the projects, and in that context the work is a significant bridging project to *Dream Rocket*.

Interdependence Tree was produced for an arts festival *Panoply*ⁱⁱⁱ, situating the work in an establishment event for the first time. One could argue that the decision to show the tree at *Panoply* was significant, as it brought in a wider community of school children, students and fibre groups, in addition to the online crafters. Marsh's call out to potential participants expressed a desire for them to articulate and reveal their personalities, developing the notion of a community of artists and makers.

Marsh the strategist had emerged alongside the artist/curator, contributions came from 23 countries and 39 states of America, over 7,000 leaves were produced, many at the Panoply event workshops. Marsh's growing knowledge and experience meant she had a clearer sense of what to expect.

During the production phase of *Interdependence Tree* Marsh realised that it was important to meticulously catalogue and archive each leaf. It was a way of acknowledging every maker's contribution and also a device, which allowed her to visually assimilate each piece as it arrived in the studio, building her concepts around the eventual work. This method has become fundamental to the production process within *Dream Rocket* as has the online narrative and interaction with collaborators through the website. The intention for *Interdependence Tree* was that it be a temporary work, however it was put on permanent display at a children's museum^{iv}, an unexpected outcome for the piece.

Objects, Symbols and Cloth

One could conclude that aesthetically the success of the *Gas Station* and the potential of *Dream Rocket* sit partly in the ambition of the scaled up works: together with the unexpected juxtaposition the objects have with their covering, the patchwork quilt: creating a visual tension that speaks of the object itself, the community of artists that created it, and wider social issues. Marianne Jorgensen used this approach, in the work *Pink Tank*, which brought together a group of '...crafters and activists...' (Black and Burish 2011:207) to knit a covering for a Second World War tank, in a public place as a protest against the Iraq war.

"The deployment of such a large blanket on such a threatening object in a public space may seem like a disarmingly absurd gesture, but the dramatic use of the crafted object to call attention to what is underneath creates a rupture in the ways in which the public interacts with the tank as a public war monument." (Black and Burish 2011:208)

Textile first emerged in Marsh's work in 2007, an accomplished crocheter, she used this technique to cover a Lawnmower, she explains "The Lawnmower is such an ordinary object that becomes accessible and resulted in a connection to people in other social circles on a deeper level than I had experienced." Crochet, like knit allows one to make custom forms in the production process, lending itself to covering an intricate form. The use of textiles evolves further in *Gas Station* introducing scale to Marsh's practice, she explains its unique qualities "Fabric is accessible by people all over the world", it provides particular benefits for her projects "It is inexpensive to ship" it can be ironed and is generally fairly resilient. Textile is the medium that Marsh has committed to for *Dream Rocket*: it allows each collaborator a means of self-expression and the artist a level of flexibility within the installation. Piecing the submissions together forming a quilt allows a degree of authorship in relation to the placement of each contribution, the narrative that this forms and the story that therefore unfolds, in the vast swathes of cloth, she explains:

"The quilt itself has become a way for people from all walks of life to share with one another, in a way that still elevates, inspires and empowers, in contributing to a group enough without diluting the contribution."

Quilting is a compelling vehicle for *Dream Rocket*, its significance in America in particular, is understood by many, socially and also in historical terms.

“Quilting was an art that crossed racial, regional, and class boundaries, produced by slave women in the south as well as by pioneer house-wives on the trek west and by New England matrons in their homes.” (Showalter 2012:158)

The American writer and critic Elaine Showalter describes how community and religious groups conveyed their own sensibilities and identities through the distinct visual aesthetic of their quilts: traditions and events emerged around the social aspects of quilting: ‘...quilting bees, figure in American women’s history, as places where women came together to exchange information, learn new skills, and discuss political issues;...’ (Showalter 2012:159). Because of Quilt’s many associations it has become a metaphor for community endeavour, memorial, suffrage and activism: by utilising the quilt as the covering device, Marsh gifts these qualities to the project: reiterating the vision behind *Dream Rocket*.

Saturn V

“By 2015- an estimated 36,000 people will have contributed to a monumental 32,000 square foot wrap.” (no date: online) this level of mass participation can be partly attributed to the vision and complexity of the project: the dream to cover the Saturn V Space Rocket. To date the subjects and environments Marsh’s works have inhabited have been domestic, local, suburban even: the global reach owing to their Internet presence and the works inclusivity: ‘...art as trigger for participation...’ (Bishop 2005: 118). In contrast to the earlier works, the subject, the Saturn V Space Rocket is truly international in its significance, grounded in a moment in history one of the 20th centuries quintessential inventions. The need to develop the Saturn V rockets was described by President John F. Kennedy as: “A high national priority an act of faith and division” (no date: online). In his now famous speech at Rice University^v during this Cold War period, he explained the imperative for America to enter into the Space Race.

“For the eyes of the world now look into space, to the moon and to the planets beyond, and we have vowed that we shall not see it governed by a hostile flag of conquest, but by a banner of freedom and peace.” (no date: online)

As an iconic object the Saturn V Space Rocket is undeniably a complex and emotive symbol of America’s past: against that history the decision to engage with this object as the subject for a mass participatory global art installation was bold and will undoubtedly inform how we interpret and read the work.

The concept for the *Dream Rocket* project evolved over a nine-month period of “highly intense” meetings. Marsh was introduced to senior staff at the Space and Rocket Centre^{vi} after *Interdependence Tree*: she cleverly harnessed the spirit and vision that surrounded the Saturn V as her theme, stressing its major tenets of science, technology, global peace, exploration and research. Her plan was to emulate her earlier works and utilise the network of collaborators to produce a wrap for the rocket. There are two Saturn V’s in Alabama: one the replica rocket, stands erect outside the Space and Rocket Centre, the other is one of the original three rockets, still in existence it is exhibited in horizontal sections, in the Davidson Centre^{vii} there. Marsh has a contractual agreement to wrap the replica rocket and is in talks to determine the feasibility of wrapping the original rocket.

The attempt to wrap either rocket poses a myriad of constraints that Marsh had not fully anticipated at the outset. The journey into the complex terrain of public arts intervention, combined with satisfying the three institutional partners that have guardianship of the Saturn V make this a work fraught with complexities. The Saturn V rockets stood 363 feet tall: therefore the cost associated with a vertical wrap makes the project prohibitively expensive.

Institutions

Marsh explores the work of other artists to try to gain insight into how to progress the wrap of the real rocket. In particular the *Over the River* project by Christo and Jeanne-Claude is insightful: although they are established international artists, there are similar institutional and government level hurdles to overcome, which Marsh can draw upon “Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s vision for *Over the River* was conceived in 1992 and includes 5.9 miles (9.5 kilometres) of silvery, luminous fabric panels to be suspended clear of and above the water...” (no date: online). The artists had to take the unusual step of completing an “Environmental Impact Statement usually reserved for major infrastructures such as bridges, highways, dams and airports.” (No date: online) As an emerging artist Marsh must convince the institutional partners of her integrity and the importance of the project. The Smithsonian Museum, the Space and Rocket Centre and NASA are the institutions that Marsh has to work with to agree the strategy for the wrapping of the real Saturn V Rocket in Huntsville Alabama. There are understandable

concerns over potential damage to the rocket structure itself. Marsh has developed a dynamic strategy around her approach to solving this, her plan is to build a structure that floats around the rocket and is then anchored to the roof of the Davidson Centre, effectively forming a sleeve. The large quilt sections will be attached to the structure, in *Gas Station* Marsh and her team secured the cloth covering directly into the structure of the building, the imperative here is that nothing touches the Saturn V.

“Engineers will work with our team and other persons of interest such as contractors, designers, architects, fabrication and manufacturing companies to discuss and determine the best structural support for our wrap.” (no date: online)

Fundraising has become a crucial part of this project: raising funds to meet specific deadlines occupy much of Marsh’s time as the project develops. She has looked to a variety of external funding sources both private and commercial and has recently undertaken a Kickstarter to raise monies for the engineers drawings, for which she is about to go out to tender. Kickstarter the internet fundraising site, set up to co fund arts projects reinforces the democratic approach to this project: allowing the individual to set up a funding goal, supporters are often followers from the artists on line community, family and friends. As it gains momentum interest may spread further. “Backers are supporting projects to help them come to life, not to profit financially. Instead, project creators offer rewards to thank backers for their support.” (no date: online) This resourcefulness is reminiscent of earlier collective endeavours, the quilting bee to stitch a maiden’s quilt. Showalter (2012) The Pot Luck Supper or Dinner on the Grounds, the co production of a meal for large gatherings of people is still very much in existence today. It is an approach that we had moved away from in terms of arts funding, relying on patronage from commercial organisations or arts councils. In part the worldwide recession has garnered a new approach, which looks back to the idea of the co-operative and shared endeavour, whilst utilising the reach of the Internet.

Once the engineer’s drawings are complete, Marsh can go out to tender for the build and will be able to accurately cost the installation of the work, getting into the finer details with the institutional partners. Cutting through and understanding institutional priorities and concerns is of paramount importance and is the key to the project succeeding. Marsh the artist/curator also has to be, Marsh the fundraiser/strategist: the duality of this role is all consuming and holds a great responsibility. Marsh has to advocate for this project whilst encouraging participation, she needs to keep growing her network and encourage others to keep submitting the works, her target to complete the wrap is 5,000 panels.

Part of Marsh’s developing practice is to celebrate the projects milestones, by exhibiting work within communities such as libraries and galleries as well as on the Internet site. These celebrations punctuate the project and allow the participants many of whom are school age, time to reflect on their individual and collective achievements thus far. Jesse and Javier from Dodge City Middle School in Kansas made new friends and realised that “We liked to work with partners. Before this project, we really did not know each other very well. Now we do!” (no date: online) This type of reaction is fairly common and helps to cement the community giving back to the participants who can then begin to visualise the end result. Marsh has realised the impactful narrative that this brings to *Dream Rocket* and has become increasingly more strategic in her choice of exhibition venues.

Currently she is discussing a satellite exhibition at the Kennedy Space Centre in the build up to the main wrap. She also attempts to situate the work alongside iconic figures from space exploration today: by bringing in astronauts such as Clayton Anderson as a juror in an exhibition, which will explore aviation at the Strategic Air and Space Museum^{viii}.

Quiet Activism

The Internet community has developed and grown, *Dream Rocket* needed it’s own website and related flickr feed, you can access the project via face book, twitter and pin it if you wish. Marsh sees this as a key to realising the piece, and her ability to network and tackle ever more complex projects. Cat Mazza founder of the craftivist website microRevolt.org talks of the overlap between crafting and the Internet.

“I use Web media to reach audiences beyond the museum. In fact this connects back to craft, because craft, like the Internet, is also seen as a democratizing medium, a social network that operates outside the institution.” (Bryan-Wilson 2010:623/4)

Many of the collaborators have stayed with Marsh throughout the three major works. The inception of the *Dream Rocket* posed a challenge to scale up the network quickly, what in fact occurred was incremental growth. Educational workshops have been developed directly or through support from her information sheets, these have consolidated the links with individuals and organisations and a

momentum has gathered behind the production of the quilt. In utilising the reach of the Internet: receiving work from children, hobbyists, guilds and students, the quilt takes on a particular aesthetic a patchwork of contributions some highly accomplished others joyous and raw, give it an immediacy and a particular amateur aesthetic. The use of amateurism within the quilt impacts on how the project is received, Marsh doesn't view the work as either political or emerging from a feminist perspective, yet it is difficult not to make those associations as Glen Adamson explains:

"Since the rise and wane of first-generation Feminism, contemporary artists have continued to employ the tropes of amateur craft, both as a means of production and as a recognisable sign of social content." (Adamson 2007: 159)

Marsh has unintentionally adopted the visual language of this idiom. This one would conclude creates a tension between what she is striving to achieve and the method of production she has chosen, which aesthetically at least speaks to many of subversion and activism. The social content of the work goes back to an earlier point the desire for people to come together to share ideas and ideals. Marsh has positioned the innovation and vision surrounding the *Dream Rocket* project as a catalyst to bring together communities from across the globe on her website. The reality is that a young man from Kansas may have his work patched next to an elderly lady from Costa Rica, what might that begin to say about our world? What might we then read into the work?

"The rise of craftivism and other politically engaged crafting practices- which value the radical potential of a particular craft activity rather than its finished end-product-shift traditional emphasis away from polished, professionally made craft objects themselves and toward a political and conceptual focus, positioning and deployment of the work involved in making them." (Black and Burish 2011:205)

The Internet community perhaps captures this aspect of the work more clearly than the finished artefact will. The virtual community, as with the many others like it, touches people: it enables creatives and makers to produce art together. Fulfilling a certain human desire to achieve collectively and to connect in a common purpose, the making of a 'new' an 'other'. Betsy Greer talks compellingly about this issue in *Craftivist History*.

"Craftivism was, for me, a way to actively recognize and remember my place in the world, a way to remember how, I can take steps toward being an agent of change. Small change? Of course. But done continually and repetitively, small changes aggregate and spread." (Greer 2011: 180)

The vision for *Dream Rocket* reflects this attitude: Marsh and her many co collaborators are quietly questioning and requesting their right to make an artwork around the Saturn V Space Rocket. It was after all developed and built by billions of American tax dollars. The work may lack an overt political intention, but essentially this quiet activism seeks permission to access the institutional setting, work with all the issues and constraints of the Saturn V and celebrate the rocket and all that it conjures up in our world fifty years on.

As with many artists working in the public arts particularly the field of installation art, Marsh has to deal with a host of fluctuating constraints and priorities often working beyond her experience, she explains: "There is no road map": dealing with uncertainty and risk have become a constant within her practice and she has learnt to embrace them. Unlike her earlier works the context for this project is very different, the sheer scale of both the wrap, the Saturn V Space Rocket and the network, intertwined with the strategic priorities, Institutional and funding hurdles, have added to the scale of the challenge to complete the project.

Marsh consciously placed herself in the public arts arena, as with many installation artists she felt that the conventions and limitations of the gallery system were not the place for her or her work. "As the recession took hold more and more there were less and less venues. I didn't see the opportunity for me as an artist." She also felt uninspired by the prospect of a traditional studio setting.

"I was already wrestling with a feeling of isolation within my studio practice and frustrated with the common inwardness arts communities can produce. Therefore, the decision to take on a collaborative endeavor might have been a natural step."

Marsh rents her studio on the second floor of a house, it is a physical version of the *Dream Rocket* website, with a nod to the multilayered functions that Marsh now has, the space is as much an office and headquarters as it is a traditional studio and has more in common with an architect or film maker. Petry (2011) Marsh's studio reflects the diverse roles she embodies strategist/artist/negotiator/curator, the place where she maps the reach of her project, receives and archives work, develops the conceptual side

of her practice and plans up and coming exhibitions as well as the wrap itself. Artist and crafter Sabrina Gschwandtner describes this ambidexterity.

“I make installations, events, and publications, among other things, that challenge the boundaries between artist and curator, or archivist, and between art and craft. I think about audience and distribution a lot.” (Bryan-Wilson 2010:627)

Concluding Thoughts

The recent works have become progressively more temporary and performative: their longevity owes much to their Internet presence, which incorporates links to the meticulously catalogued image bank and archive of past projects. Marsh increasingly focuses on site specific event based pieces: which are transient in nature. This enables her to attempt projects that would otherwise not be feasible. The temporary, also allows the work to be read within the context and environment of that ‘moment in time’ a device used by both land artists and art activists within their practice. This ephemerality can attribute the work with mythological status, augmented by it’s on line presence, which becomes the only permanent trace, Marsh is clear that: “The photos are how you communicate with the world, whether temporary or not the photos are what is in our world, with a knowledge based economy with everything online, is what carries the weight.”

If Marsh accomplishes her dream to wrap the Saturn V, she will have overcome many complex hurdles and succeeded in influencing others, about the powerful message that her project conveys: a message of unity, creativity and mass participation. The quilt itself will be made from tens of thousands of hands, from across the globe, all inspired by a Dream, launched more than fifty years ago, in a world very different from the one we inhabit today.

The Internet has of course made this all possible as well as the remarkable vision and spirit of Jennifer Marsh. The quilt will be complete by Spring 2015, as the final stages of production gather momentum, one can only hope and expect that Marsh’s “Spheres of Influence” will make the wrap a reality too. The art work if achieved will be exhibited for a two to three month period, a relatively long time when compared to the *Over the River* project, which will only be exhibited for two weeks. It is difficult to comprehend the level of engagement and the years of work that will culminate in the final wrap. What I feel is most significant about this project is that it represents a quiet activism, a collaborative endeavour, ironically enabled by the Internet but who’s benefit sits predominantly in the doing, the co-production of the quilt, and the sharing of a dream as Tami Katz-Friberg puts it ‘...a celebration of manual production in a world that has wildly over-computerised itself.’ (Katz-Friberg: 605).

Notes

- ⁱ Interview with Jennifer Marsh this and all subsequent quotes without references are Marsh’s voice. A two hour interview took place using Skype on 4th January 2014 and was supplemented by email correspondence on 9th December
- ⁱⁱ International Fiber Collaborative (IFC), was founded in 2007 by artist Jennifer Marsh. It is a non-profit organisation.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Panoply an arts festival funded by the Alabama Art Council, at Big Springs International Park in Huntsville Alabama, USA
- ^{iv} Early Works children’s Museum In Huntsville Alabama, USA
- ^v Rice University Houston Texas, USA
- ^{vi} Space and Rocket Centre, Huntsville Alabama, USA
- ^{vii} Davidson centre at the Space and Rocket Centre, Huntsville Alabama, USA
- ^{viii} Strategic Air and Space Museum, Ashland, NE, USA

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Fig.7-1 *Gas Station Wrap 2008*, by Jennifer Marsh and International
Fiber Collaborative, Central New York
Photo kind permission of Jennifer Marsh



Fig.7-2 *Interdependence Tree 2008*, by Jennifer Marsh and International
Fiber Collaborative 2009, Panapoly, Huntsville Alabama
Photo kind permission of Jennifer Marsh



Fig.7-3 *Mapping Submissions for Dream Rocket*
Photo kind permission of Jennifer Marsh

The Dream Rocket Project



Study Three

Preparatory Collage

by Jennifer Marsh

Fig.7-4 *Dream Rocket Collage*, by Jennifer Marsh 2013, Preparatory study of the Dream Rocket in the Davidson Centre at the Space and Rocket Centre, Huntsville Alabama
Photo kind permission of Jennifer Marsh